

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

U.S.-Iran Proxy Competition in Iraq

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Abstract

Over the course of 2019 and into 2020, the United States and Iran came perilously close to full out war, with alleged proxy forces in Iraq at the center of it. This report takes a closer look at U.S. and Iranian partnerships and so-called proxies in Iraq. It finds that while external intervention is undoubtedly a major factor, the narrative of proxy warfare can overstate external influence and control and underestimate the role of Iraqi actors and interests. Such findings suggest a need to rethink the nature of external states' influence in Iraq, both to guard against mis-attribution and conflict escalation, and to provide more insights into the likely more complex and sub-state dominated future of proxy warfare.

This report, part of a series by New America and Arizona State University's Center on the Future of War, draws upon extensive research and interviews conducted in Iraq and Washington, D.C., to illustrate changing proxy dynamics in Iraq and their implications for the larger U.S.-Iranian tensions.

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